**Extract from *The Penalty* byMal Peet**

We were river people, fishermen. People of the River Spirit, Loma, who is slow and green and clever. We were not warriors, so when the fierce people from beyond the forest attacked our village we did not know what to do. They came out of the trees, howling, at the time of

light but- no-sun-yet, when my mother and the other women were waking the first fires. I picked up my young sister who was playing at the front of our house and ran with the others towards our boats. Some of us fell with spears in our backs. I looked for my mother and saw her go down broken beneath the feet of the fierce people who swept over her like water.

And when we reached the sands we saw two great war-canoes on the river, and in them there were terrible No-Skins who killed more of us with their fire-sticks. My father was one who died there. He went onto his knees with his hands on his chest full of blood and then he fell with his face in the water. The air was so full of screaming that I could hardly breathe it.

We were trapped, and I thought we would all die, and I tried to make myself ready. But they did not kill us, not there, not then. The war-canoes came onto the beach, breaking our boats. The fierce people and the No-Skins used their spears and their fire-sticks to beat the women and children back towards the houses. They tore my sister from me. She did not cry out even when they threw her down, but her eyes were huge and her mouth was open like a person found drowned. I was kneeling beside my father, chanting for his spirit, when I looked up and saw a No-Skin looking down at me. His face was the colour of a peeled animal with the fat still on it, but there was yellow fur around his mouth. That was how I thought, then: peeled animal, yellow fur, fire-sticks. Because I had never seen white men before, or their guns.

I was terribly afraid. I thought the one standing over me was Lord Death from our stories. He kept his raw-looking eyes on me and shouted in his language. Hands seized me and forced me to where our other men had been gathered. Our hands were tied together and our necks fastened to a long chain of iron.